

Canada's Military Landscape

Alternatives interviews Ginger Stones, the Department of National Defence's Director General Environment.

AJ *When did the Department of National Defence (DND) create the Environment Division?*

GS It was set up as a directorate back in 1983 and then it changed to a division about ten years ago.

AJ *What was the motivation for starting to recognize environmental issues within DND?*

GS Back in 1983 environmental issues were emerging within the consciousness of the Canadian public and the department became aware that it had environmental issues to deal with. We started out dealing with energy conservation, with forestry and vegetation-type issues, pesticides, environmental protection relative to some materials like urea-formaldehyde foam insulation, and asbestos and then storage tanks and things like sewage treatment facilities. So that was the beginning. Over time, awareness grew, people were hired and the mandate continued to expand. But it's not just this division that deals with environmental issues within the department. There's also the army, the navy, the air

Echoes of Distant Wars

ALTHOUGH CANADA has not been the site of a battleground in the 20th century, Canadians are still dealing with the effects of war. In April 2003, the Auditor General called for Canada's military to do more to protect the environment, noting that National Defence failed to follow federal environmental laws to protect habitats. Examples ranged from ordinances near CFB Petawawa being set off by local forest fires to lead weights and batteries dumped in Nanoose Bay off the coast of British Columbia since 1965.

Beyond the activities of the Canadian Forces, the environmental legacy of war includes contamination from chemical and nuclear weapons developed by Canadian industries. After the end of World War II, Stormont Chemicals of Cornwall, Ontario, dumped 2500 tonnes of mustard gas off the coast of Sable Island, part of an estimated 453,000 tonnes of chemical weapons now lying at the bottom of the world's oceans.

It is known that the Bras d'Or Lake region of Cape Breton was a dumping site for mustard gas, but it is not known how much was dumped or where. In 2003, plans by oil and gas companies to seismically test the seabed off Cape Breton raised concerns about potentially disturbing up to 14,000 tonnes of mustard gas.

In Elmira, Ontario, UniRoyal's decades-long production of military materials (including Agent Orange for the Vietnam War) has contaminated the aquifers beneath Elmira with

NDMA (N-nitrose dimethylamine).

Then there is the nuclear contamination of Port Hope. From 1933, Port Hope, Ontario, was the site of a facility that enriched uranium to produce the first atomic bombs. In the decades that followed, roughly 90,000 cubic metres of radionuclides, heavy metals and PCBs leaked into the harbour and were absorbed by the local fish. There are reports that women and young people in Port Hope have a higher incidence of brain cancer, which may be linked to the high levels of radioactivity.

In her report, the Auditor General also gave examples of the military's environmental stewardship. However, early this year, the residents of Port Hope walked out of a meeting set up by Cameco Corporation hoping to build a new nuclear plant in Ontario and supply it with fuel produced in Port Hope. The battle between civilians and the producers of military and nuclear materials is far from over. ♪

– James Bow

Follow up

Read the Auditor General's report at www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/reports.nsf/html/20030407ce.html

The Warfare Agent Disposal Project reports on its progress at www.wadproject.forces.gc.ca/overview_e.htm